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Egypt beyond representation : materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca Romana

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Part II

Understanding stone in the Roman world

*“About the sea the continents lie ‘vast and vastly spread’, ever supplying you with products from those regions. Here is brought from every land and sea all the crops of the seasons and the produce of each land, river, lake, as well as of the arts of the Greeks and barbarians [...] It cannot be otherwise than that there always be here an abundance of all that grows and is manufactured among each people. So many merchant ships arrive here, conveying every kind of goods from every people every hour, every day, so that the city is like a factory common to the whole earth [...] The arrival and departures of the ships never stop, so that one would express admiration not only for the harbour, but even for the sea [...] So everything comes together here, trade, seafaring, farming, the scourings of the mines, all the crafts that exist or have existed, all that is produced and grown”.*¹⁰⁷

Such is the 2nd century AD Greek orator Aelius Aristides’ account of Rome. Although the text is not a strictly historical source, the passage nevertheless gives an impression of how to imagine the capital of the Imperium Romanum. The city’s demands were enormous and could not be met by Italian sources alone. Consequently, its market was soon to be supplied from all parts of the Empire, and Rome came to play a pivotal role in this pan-Mediterranean trade network.¹⁰⁸ All kinds of goods reached the city through its various supply routes, either by land or over sea.¹⁰⁹ Well-known is the *annona*,

the shipment of grain from Egypt, northern Africa, Sicily, and Spain to the ports at the Italian coast, which allegedly involved the transport of over 400,000 tons annually.¹¹⁰ Other principal trade commodities included wine and oil, textiles, slaves, and decorative stones.

As perhaps one of the most prominent features of Antiquity, decorative stones were the Roman world’s construction materials *par excellence*. The Roman appreciation of marble is suitably embodied in the famous saying attributed to Emperor Augustus: “I found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble”.¹¹¹ The most beautifully coloured and the purest white stones were obtained from all over the Empire, and the Roman Imperial period saw a sharp increase in commercially exploited sources.¹¹² Considerable effort was put into the transportation and distribution of stones, which mainly reached Rome first and were subsequently distributed across the entire Empire. These materials were sometimes transported over several thousands of kilometres before they were put to use, which markedly contrasts economically rationalistic models. The enormous quantities of stones that were processed were used to build the Empire, both literally and metaphorically: because they were

107. Aelius Aristides, *To Rome* 10-13; after Meijer – van Nijf (1992) 82-83 no. 112 (translation Behr).

108. This is not the place to explore Roman trade and the importance of the Mediterranean Sea for Roman trade and economy in general. To gain understanding of Roman trade and economy in its Mediterranean context, see Horden and Purcell (2000), who forward the idea of the Mediterranean world as connective microecologies.

109. Sea transportation was preferred over transport by land. The latter form of transport was slow, inconvenient, and involved considerable technical and logistic problems. Pliny the Younger’s letter to emperor Trajan is well-known, in which the former advocates the cutting of a canal to link the city of Nicomedia in present-day Turkey with the nearby lake of Sapanca Göl to enable water transport (*Epistulae* 10.41). The passage demonstrates that transport by ship was both easier and cheaper than land transport; cf. Ward-Perkins (1992b) 67. Information on ancient transportation costs is scarce. The main source is Diocletian’s Price Edict of 301 AD, which provides valuable insights into the price structures of the early 4th century AD. Meijer and van Nijf (1992, 133-134) have calculated the effect of different means of transportation on the price on the basis of the Price Edict, and a

1st century AD papyrus which mentions the freight rates for river transport (these are absent from the Price Edict, as it only refers to the rates for transport over land and by sea). Their estimated ratio for the average price increases as a function of means of transport is 1 (sea) : 4.9 (river) : 28 (land); cf. Maischberger (1997) 25 and n. 95 with further references, and Pochmarski (2012) 31-34, with particular focus on marble transport on land and by river.

110. The total amount of grain involved in the annual supply is difficult to calculate. The estimate of about 400,000 tons is based on the combination of two literary texts. The first, a fragment of the 4th-century AD *Epitome de Caesaribus* (I.6), states that “in his [i.e. Augustus’] days twenty million modii of grain were imported each year from Egypt to the city” (after Meijer – van Nijf [1992] 98 no. 124). In a passage in his *Jewish War* (II.382-383 and 385-386), Flavius Josephus reports that the African grain supplies to Rome are twice as high as those from Egypt, making an amount of about forty million modii of grain annually (cf. *ibid.*, 98-99 no. 125). In sum, imports from Egypt and Africa would add up to about sixty million modii of grain, which equals 440,000 tonnes. For a review of this and other estimated figures, based on estimations of the Roman population, cf. Stecher (2009) 19-21. On the *annona* see, e.g., De Salvo (1998); for the grain supply from Egypt in the context of the Roman grain trade see Erdkamp (2005).

111. Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 28.3. For a recent contextualisation of this phrase see Fant (1999).

112. For recent views on the intensification of connectivity in the Roman world, see *Globalisation and the Roman world* (2015).

used as construction material for architecture and statuary, stones brought about associations of luxury and prestige from the onset, and hence became symbols of (Imperial) wealth and power. Consequently, the first centuries AD saw the phenomenon of a pan-Mediterranean stone trade reach an unprecedented scale.

Part II of this study focuses on understandings of stone in the Roman world. In two subsequent sections, different aspects of the diverse engagements of Romans with stone are investigated in order to assess their potential for gaining a better understanding of so-called *Aegyptiaca* in the Roman world. On the basis of an analysis of the Roman stone trade and stone working practices, the first section evaluates relations between

artistic style, iconography, and (origins of) material. By focusing on particular characteristics, including stock-piling of stone in Rome, pre-fabrication of freshly quarried stone materials, itinerant craftsmen, and the relations between materials and carvers, this section attempts to assess the underlying assumptions that determine the way in which *Aegyptiaca* are traditionally understood, as has been argued in Part I. The second section focuses on the driving forces behind the stone trade and the production of stone objects, and considers issues of demand and Roman consumption of stone, and subsequently presents examples of materials and materiality of Roman stone sculpture ‘beyond representation’.